

The ‘incorruptible inheritors of 1916’: the battle for ownership of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising

Desmond Greaves, writing in *Marxism Today* in April 1966, noted that while the tinsel dangled and Dublin streets were bright with green white and orange flags, the *bourgeoisie* was busy giving its own account of 1916: ‘Philistine professors who never expressed a republican sentiment in their lives, are producing learned papers, well-documented from official sources. One would almost be led to believe that the Easter Rising was what put into power the class and government who are in power today.’¹ Greaves was not the only person to express concern that the commemoration of the Rising had political implications in the present.² Many of the commemorative practices in 1966 implicitly supported the view that the independent state and its government were an extension of the revolutionary project. Seán Lemass, who had been Taoiseach since 1959, embedded the rhetoric of patriotism into economic arguments and, in claiming for himself and Fianna Fáil the legacy of the Easter Rising, he was also casting the mantle of the Easter leaders over the party’s economic policies. The 1960s was a decade of social and economic transition, and references to the past were an important means of asserting legitimacy and finding stability in the present. In Ireland in 1966 this meant asserting ownership of the Easter Rising.

The official message of the commemoration

Seán Lemass acknowledged that the commemorative year would prompt many people to ask what the leaders of 1916 would think of Ireland in 1966 if they could come back to view it. As a member of the revolutionary generation he said that many considered freedom to be an end in itself, and presumed that, in freedom, all economic and social problems would settle themselves, being of course the consequences of foreign rule. Therefore, Lemass ventured, when Irish people

¹ D. Greaves, ‘Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Easter Rising’, *Marxism Today*, April 1966, p. 116.

² See R. Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), p.36.

came to control their own destiny in one part of Ireland, there was no agreement on policies of social and economic development.³ Speaking of the revolutionary period, Lemass noted:

In those days, the members of the Republican movement with whom I had personal contact, spoke only about the political aspects of freedom. We knew that individual leaders of the 1916 Rising, like James Connolly, and of the post-Rising movement, had their own ideas about economic and social policy, but there was a prevailing mood which tended to discourage not merely the definition of economic and social aims, but even their active public discussion, for fear it might breed dissension in the national ranks or divert energies from the national struggle.⁴

In separating political and economic elements, Lemass effectively sidelined the views of socialists and communists - who had interpreted the revolution as an economic struggle against capitalist imperialism - and conveyed as a much more limited and *ad hoc* change of guard.⁵ A rhetorical sleight of hand was evident in the same speech during which the Taoiseach talked about the Easter Rising as having released forces which had been ‘moving deep but almost unsuspected in the Irish soul’. These forces ‘had been disturbed by the labour struggles of 1913, by the Ulster Volunteer movement, and by the impact of the world war...’ In this view, rather than being an intrinsic part of the Irish revolution, labour struggles were cast as disruptive and different; they were akin to Unionism or the First World War. In side-lining the left in the past Lemass was attempting to mute its representatives in the present.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising occurred during the period of modernization of the Irish economy which placed export-led industrialization and economic cooperation with Europe at the heart of the country’s future. A Free Trade Agreement with Britain had been

³ National Archives of Ireland Government Information Service (hereafter cited as NAI GIS), 1/221, Speech by Seán Lemass at inaugural meeting of the Law Students’ Debating Society of Ireland, Dublin, 10 February 1966.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a discussion of the way in which certain figures of the left were cast from the historical record see C. McGuire, *Sean McLoughlin: Ireland’s Forgotten Revolutionary* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2011), pp. 140-158.

signed in January 1966 and acted as a transitional measure towards membership of the European Economic Community.⁶ Both policies had clear implications for Irish sovereignty and economic independence. In the Dáil the Labour Party TD Seán Treacy attacked Fianna Fáil members for reneging on their principles: '[they] have perpetrated an act of union with Britain more final, binding and irrevocable than the Charter of Henry II or the Act of Union'.⁷ The signing of the Free Trade Agreement with Britain— which the *United Irishman* described as the 'recent Act of Union' - represented the sharpest sign to his critics that Lemass had abandoned a policy of independence. Economic dependence on Britain was seen to represent also an end of the struggle for political and cultural independence; so that, A Raftery argued in the *Irish Socialist*, the commemoration of the Easter Rising had become 'an occasion for mild embarrassment rather than one for rejoicing'.⁸ Lemass's policy of relying on foreign capital had led to a position, Raftery claimed, in which he 'in fact repudiates the policy of 1916, while honouring it as a sentimental memory'.⁹

To his critics Lemass countered that not only did the Free Trade Agreement allow Ireland to stand on its own feet economically, but that closer ties with Europe would further the cause of Irish unity and would help to 'sweep away some of the arguments which have been used to sustain Partition, and to create a new situation in which the advantages of Unity will become so increasingly apparent that it must help to bring about the political conditions in which it may be realised'.¹⁰ Lemass, throughout the 1960s, was to the fore in reframing nationalist discourse so that the national interest, once seen as a demand for political, cultural and economic isolation, came to imply the achievement of material prosperity, so that, 'the success of the nationalist endeavour was to be measured in wealth and economic growth rather than in cultural or

⁶ H. Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 150.

⁷ Quoted in Patterson, *Ireland since 1939*, p. 151.

⁸ A. Raftery, '1916 Re-examined', in S. Nolan, (ed.), *Easter Week 1916-1966*, published by the *Irish Socialist*, Dublin, 1966, p. 4.

⁹ Raftery, '1916 Re-examined', p. 4.

¹⁰ National Archives of Ireland Department of the Taoiseach (hereafter cited as NAI DT), 9361k/62, Seán Lemass speaking at the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis, 16 January 1962.

territorial integrity'.¹¹ Erskine Childers, Minister for Transport and Power, told an assembled crowd in County Monaghan, that the best tribute to the heroes of 1916 'would be a massive drive by management and workers to increase productivity and seek new export markets' and argued for a closer understanding between employers and workers.¹² This form of 'disciplined nationalism' was very clearly deployed during the jubilee commemorations of the Easter Rising; an event that was seen as an opportunity to showcase the economic victories of the government's modernizing policies.

Improvements in agriculture, industry, trade, education and living standards were referenced by government ministers in speeches and interviews throughout 1966 which pointed to the advancements made since independence. In an interview with the *Washington Post* Seán McEntee was asked, looking back, what had given him most satisfaction. His reply, the journalist reported, was instant: 'the improvement in the lot of our people'. McEntee noted that slums were beginning to clear, beggars were no longer a problem on the streets, farmers were becoming more efficient, industrial output was growing and unemployment and emigration were both dropping.¹³ This message was being sent out throughout the commemorative programme.

The Department of External Affairs commissioned George Morrison, director of *Mise Éire*, to make a commemorative film for the jubilee so that the telecasting of a suitable film would 'not only help to correct erroneous views of the Irish struggle for independence but by including some material on the Dublin of today, it will also assist in disseminating abroad a more accurate picture of modern Ireland'.¹⁴ The commission was for a 16 mm film, 'two-thirds composed of actuality material of the Rising, the remaining one-third to be devoted to the Dublin of today'.¹⁵ It was suggested to Morrison that he include shots of the ESB (electricity) station at

¹¹ P. Mair, *The Changing Irish Party System* (London: Pinter, 1987), p. 182, quoted in Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 151.

¹² *Northern Standard*, 22 April 1966.

¹³ *Washington Post*, 10 April 1966.

¹⁴ National Archives of Ireland Department of External Affairs (hereafter cited as NAI DEA), Madrid Embassy, IC 3/9, Department of External Affairs to All Missions, 16 January 1965.

¹⁵ NAI DEA, 2000/14/77, Frank Coffey to George Morrison, 12 November 1965.

Ringsend, Telefís Éireann head-quarters in Donnybrook and the Unidare factory in Finglas.¹⁶ Foreign audiences had little interest in these images of modern Ireland and many outlets showed the film without its contemporary segment.¹⁷ Nevertheless the link between the Easter Rising and the economic progress of independent Ireland was being made and this was true across the official and unofficial commemorative programmes. Gael Linn's film *An Tine Bheo* (*The Living Flame*) was also commissioned by the Department of External Affairs. In its proposal for the project, Gael Linn explained that its film would not only commemorate the Rising, 'it would also relate that event to the modern lives of the audience who are its heirs'.¹⁸ Bernadette Truden wrote in the *Boston Globe* that *An Tine Bheo* 'contrasts the harsh events of fifty years ago and the placid exterior of life today. This is the main theme, the way in which the present enshrines the past and the ghost-like presence of history lives on as a background to everyday life.'¹⁹ The blurring of lines between past and present was also apparent in Telefís Éireann's hugely popular dramatisation of the Rising, *Insurrection*, in which events of Easter week were conveyed as if unfolding in real time on television (the television station itself was only five years old at this point) and in the GAA pageant, *Seachtar Fear Seacht Lá*. In the latter James Connolly's character declares:

Call up the workers once again to testify
 How much of dignity they've gained in fifty years
 The slums no more!
 Health not the sole province of the privileged
 And those who grovelled on their knees are erect.²⁰

¹⁶ NAI DEA, 2000/14/77, Department of External Affairs to George Morrison, 4 February 1966.

¹⁷ Higgins, *Transforming 1916*, p. 180.

¹⁸ NAI DEA, 2000/14/71, Gael Linn to Department of External Affairs (no name, no date).

¹⁹ Bernardine Truden, *Recollections of the 50th Anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916* (Dublin 1966). This collection of articles was originally published in the *Boston Globe*.

²⁰ B. MacMahon, *Seachtar Fear, Seacht Lá*, unpublished script, 1966, p. 31. For a discussion of these commemorative forms see Higgins, *Transforming 1916*.

In the pageant, which was held in Croke Park for three nights in March 1966 and included a cast of almost 400, the signatories of the Proclamation, accompanied by witnesses, were used to express different aspects of Irish life. Seán MacDiarmada called out to the crowd:

I was a Transport man and so from men and women too who man the Transport of our
Irish earth and sea and sky
I call my witnesses ... Let them come forth
And vouch for Irish accuracy and zeal
And, in this fashion, honour Easter week and me.

The idea underlining this juxtaposition of old and new (implicitly and explicitly) was that 1916 had made 1966 possible: the Easter Rising legitimised modernisation and modernisation legitimised the Rising. However, the embedding of this economic strategy within a longer story of Irish nationalism – effectively naturalising it – took place within the context of increasing industrial unrest.

Organising opposition

In 1964 Ireland topped the world in terms of man hours lost through strikes.²¹ In the year of the golden jubilee of the Easter Rising there were 112 strikes, involving 52,000 workers. Throughout the 1960s industrial action was much more protracted in Ireland and involved more people than during the previous decade.²² April 1966 opened with threatened strikes among CIE (public transport) workers, which would have disrupted all rail and bus services; by the workers of the sugar, confectionery and food-processing trade; and by the National Farmers' Association. The agricultural sector had been one of those negatively affected by a dock strike in the previous months and, at the beginning of May 1966, all commercial banking north and south of the border was brought to a standstill by a strike by 3,400 junior officials. In this year, too, strikes by fitters

²¹ Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 154,

²² C. McCarthy, *The Decade of Upheaval: Irish Trade Unions in the Nineteen Sixties* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1973), p. 20.

in the state-owned Electricity Supply Board resulted in legislation outlawing strike action in the industry. Government Ministers, throughout 1966, invoked the leaders of the Easter Rising to argue against industrial action. Lemass told an audience in August 1966, ‘I think they [the Easter leaders] would be surprised and disappointed to find that patriotism, in its finest sense, appears today to have so little influence on individual and sectional behaviour, and the extent to which self-interest is so often pursued in a manner which implies disregard for the national damage it can do’.²³ George Colley, introducing a new course in Civics in post-primary schools, decried the nation’s lack of awareness that damage inflicted on one section was damage to the community as a whole. This was exemplified, the Minister for Education noted, in Ireland’s approach to industrial relations which was hypnotized by the British example. Colley told his audience: ‘The Proclamation of 1916 envisaged a new approach – an Irish approach – to social justice.’²⁴

At the heart of the debate, fifty years after the Easter Rising, was what constituted Irish independence: economic, social and cultural. The government wanted to decouple the idea of freedom from British rule and the reality of dependence on British capital while the left wanted to press home the contradiction. Socialists and communists were arguing for a much deeper and more extensive understanding of the potential of the Irish revolution than those in power could countenance. Among many intellectuals and commentators the view was widespread that, given the economic problems of the previous decades, the real victory of the independent state in 1966 was that it had survived at all. Moreover, religious leaders advocated a sober application of the revolutionary spirit. The Christian Brothers’ monthly magazine, *Our Boys*, argued in April 1966 that other nations saw Irishmen as ‘often lacking in common sense, emotional rather than logical, good planners with plenty of ideas rather than good executors who will carry out a task with perseverance and constancy’. In this context it was suggested that the coming of the Common market might be the best thing for the Irish in ‘making us pull ourselves together, and be more

²³ NAI GIS, 1/221, Speech by Seán Lemass to Law Students’ Debating Society, Dublin, 10 February 1966.

²⁴ NAI GIS, 1/77, Address by George Colley, Minister for Education, to the Dublin Social Study Congress, 21 June 1966.

worthy of our long tradition of unselfish devotion to the cause of our native land'.²⁵ Earlier in the decade Bishop Philbin had contended that one of the problems for the Irish was that they did not feel that patriotism belonged with business and everyday work: 'We have read and sung about [patriotism] in relation to military conflict and political struggles and we cannot visualize it in any other settings. ...There is no glamour in fighting an adverse balance of trade.'²⁶ A British official's view of Lemass was that, unlike de Valera, Lemass was a businessman at the head of a more business-like administration: 'the political atmosphere in the South is changing. The spirit of 1916 and 1922 is on the wane'.²⁷ The spirit of the revolutionary period (never clearly defined) was being adapted rather than jettisoned and it continued to anchor political and economic rhetoric.

One of the consequences of the restructuring of the Irish economy was that industrial workers were greater in number and more confident than at any other time in the history of the southern state. The early 1960s saw a rise in trade union-membership and increased support for the Labour Party which won twenty-two seats in the 1965 general election and doubled its vote in Dublin. Brendan Halligan identified the period as a historic opportunity for the Labour party to align Irish politics along left/right lines as the two larger parties had lost their *raison d'être* as the generation formed by 1916 and the civil war.²⁸ Momentum appeared to be left-wards and the 1966 Labour conference, with attendance rivaling that of Fianna Fáil's Ard Fheis, saw leader Brendan Corish stress his own and his party's adherence to a 'coherent socialist philosophy' which, one report noted, was a 'firm declaration of socialism – not yet clearly defined'.²⁹ Such

²⁵ *Our Boys*, April 1966, quoted in C. Holohan, 'More than a revival of memories? 1960s youth and the 1916 Rising', in M. Daly and M. O'Callaghan *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), p. 179.

²⁶ Quoted in Holohan, 'More than a revival of memories?', p. 177.

²⁷ 'Economic Relations with the Irish Republic', 5 feb 1960, PRO, Cab 129/100, in Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p.148.

²⁸ Patterson, *Ireland Since 1939*, p. 163.

²⁹ *Irish Times*, 17 October 1966 in N. Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party 1922-73* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007), pp.239-40.

was the optimism among some members that two years later the party conference famously proclaimed that ‘the Seventies will be socialist’.

The left was growing in confidence by 1966. Moreover, there was a fluidity of ideas passing among republicans, socialists and communists in Ireland and, up until the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969, figures like James Connolly’s son Roddy (who had moved from the Communist party to the Labour Party) regarded Irish republicans as the natural allies of the left.³⁰ In the previous decade the IRA had made clear that it had no link with communism, an ‘ideology repugnant to the overwhelming majority’ of Irish people, and speakers at the annual Wolfe Tone commemorations at Bodenstown warned those gathered to ignore the small band of communists (several of whom were former IRA volunteers) who regularly attended.³¹ However, by the 1960s, some communists had become influential figures within the IRA and Cathal Goulding, who became Chief of Staff in 1962, attempted to broaden the radical agenda of the organisation to include a comprehensive economic and social programme. Republicans became involved in rural co-operatives; set up a housing action committee in Dublin that staged sit-ins to highlight poor living conditions; and organised illegal ‘fish-ins’ on exclusive salmon runs in the west of Ireland.³² An economic focus also provided a major part of republican activity in opposition to the ‘Western Europe Superstate’ and the IRA’s Easter statement of 1963 warned that ‘the continued existence of the Irish people as a distinct national entity is endangered as never before’ by the proposed immersion in the Common Market.³³ The economic and social agendas were accompanied by the setting up of an IRA Department of Political Education in 1965 which aimed to organize educational sessions for volunteers. A comprehensive Garda Report of 1966 noted that the appointment of Trinity educated communist Roy Johnston as Director of Political

³⁰ In 1967 Connolly advocated a ‘progressive’ alliance between Labour and Republicans on Wicklow County Council to oppose the ‘reactionary’ parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, in C. McGuire, ‘Defenders of the state: the Irish Labour Party, coalitionism and revisionism, 1969–77’ *Irish Studies Review*, 2015, pp.8-9.

³¹ B. Hanley and S. Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers’ Party* (Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2009), p. 6.

³² Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 58.

³³ Hanley and Millar, *Lost Revolution*, p. 36.

Education was a ‘complete departure from former IRA policy’ in associating with communist or left-wing groups.³⁴ Sinn Féin explained the large-scale education of republicans as an attempt to impart to them ‘an understanding of the social questions of the day together with an appreciation of the part the movement will play in securing for the people the guarantees enshrined in the 1916 Proclamation’.³⁵ Cathal Goulding spent the 1966 commemoration of the Easter Rising in prison, on remand for the possession of a Luger pistol and 3,000 rounds of ammunition. During his detention he was replaced by Seamus Costello who used the opportunity to push through changes even more radical than those envisioned by Goulding.³⁶

An alternative narrative

Those who felt strongly about how the Republic of Ireland was being run in 1966 understood the importance of shaping the narrative of the revolutionary project. Lemass had made some conciliatory remarks about those Irishmen who fought in the First World War saying that while he had been guilty of questioning the motives of those who fought in the British armies it must now be acknowledged that ‘they were motivated by the highest purpose’.³⁷ Raftery responded in the *Irish Socialist*:

When Mr Lemass praises the sincerity of those Irishmen who went to fight for Britain during the first world war or when a Fine Gael speaker lumps together the names of Wolfe Tone, O’Connell, Pearse and Redmond, these are not just attempts to heal past

³⁴ NAI DT, 98/6/495, ‘Review of Unlawful and Allied Organisations’.

³⁵ *United Irishman*, February 1966.

³⁶ Matt Treacy, ‘Rethinking the Republic: The Republican Movement and 1966’, in R. O’Donnell (ed.), *The Impact of the 1916 Rising: Among the Nations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), p. 225.

³⁷ NAI GIS, 1/221, Speech by Seán Lemass to Law Students’ Debating Society, Dublin, 10 February 1966.

wounds. Sincerity is not what was in question. The question was, and is, who was right from the viewpoint of Irish independence at the different stages of history.³⁸

As Taoiseach, it made sense for Lemass to attempt to construct a more inclusive national story (however limited this might now seem to have been). However, for others it was important to remember divisions and ideological differences because not to do so stripped the revolution of its radicalism. The government was employing the Easter Rising as a stabilising force in 1966 in a way that reinforced the authority of the state and its political parties. Michael O’Riordan warned, ‘Subtle attempts are being made, not without a degree of success, to convince people that we will be commemorating the “achievement” of what the ’16 men died for; and an attempt to depict them as “the founders of the modern Irish State”.’³⁹

The alternative narrative depicted the Rising as a moment of integrity that was quickly betrayed. Desmond Greaves noted that the foot soldiers of the Citizen Army and the Volunteers were largely working class (with officers who came from the artisan and lower professional classes). The bourgeoisie, Greaves argued, had stood aloof in 1916 and had been on the sidelines during the revolutionary period but had, nevertheless, been the sole beneficiary of the sacrifices of the common people.⁴⁰ For the editor of the *Irish Socialist*, two currents had always existed in the struggle for independence: those who wanted a limited amount of independence and those who wanted a complete break with Britain. Behind the former group lay class interests which saw the imperial connection as essential for their development and against them stood the workers, the small businessmen and the intellectuals. The temporary alliance carved between these two groups had ended with the Treaty and the coming to power of Cumann na Gaedheal, which had made no serious attempt to change the economic relationship with Britain.⁴¹ George Gilmore, in a series of articles for the *United Irishman*, noted the pivotal period after the Rising, during which the national question dominated and Labour was told to wait: ‘Labour waited – and

³⁸ *Irish Socialist*, March 1966.

³⁹ *Irish Socialist*, March 1966.

⁴⁰ Greaves, ‘Reflections’, p. 115.

⁴¹ Raftery, ‘1916 Re-examined’, p. 4.

that was the great failure of our generation. I do not think it is too much to say that it was the determining factor in causing the collapse of the independence movement.’⁴²

The Citizen Army was also a significant bridge between a rebellion by workers and a rebellion by nationalists. It was described as representing ‘the most vital link of the many that forever joins the two climacteric years of Irish history – 1913 and 1916’.⁴³ The Dublin Lockout of 1913 had been a practical failure which was understood as a moral victory but, unlike the Easter Rising, had stopped short of being reframed as a triumph. However, it was argued by Joseph Deasy, the lines of demarcation that divided the various political and social groups during the Lockout and the revolution that followed were remarkably similar. James Connolly was one of the few who understood the alignment of forces merging to challenge the imperialist set-up. That failure of understanding, Deasy asserted, led to the defeat of progressive forces in 1921 and 1922, leaving ‘capitulation to capitalism’ as official policy.⁴⁴

Central to the narrative was James Connolly. If the most important battle in 1966 was an economic one then Connolly was the most relevant of the Easter leaders. His absence had been felt keenly by some in the years after the Rising. Frank Robbins, of the Citizen Army, told the Bureau of Military History that the ‘truth of the matter was that not having such men to guide the organization, the majority of the men of 1918 onwards, strange as it may seem, in no way resembled or held the outlook which was dominant up to 1916 and which was responsible for the great deeds performed during Easter Week by the Irish Citizen Army’. The response of the Socialist Party of Ireland was to have a commemoration in 1919 on 5 June, the anniversary of Connolly’s birth.⁴⁵ The regenerative power of commemoration was understood very well by those involved in the Irish revolution and by succeeding generations. On 15 May 1966, fifty

⁴² G. Gilmore, *Labour and the Republican Movement* (Dublin: Republican Publications, 1966), p. 19.

⁴³ Joseph Deasy, ‘1913-1916: Similar Battle Lines!’, in Nolan, *Easter Week 1916-1966*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Deasy, ‘1913-1916’, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Bureau of Military History, Frank Robbins, Sergeant in the Irish Citizen Army, 1916, WS 586.

years after Connolly's execution, over 6,000 trade unionists marched through Dublin in a parade that included a significant contingent from the north.⁴⁶

For the left, the rejection of the official commemorative included the celebration of the twenty-six county state. There was a very significant investment in the period 1913 - 21 which offered a counter to the more usual nationalist 'four glorious years' of 1916 - 20. Moreover, in presenting the Lockout in Dublin and the Rising as inextricably bound, the north could also be given a different place in the story. Larkin had led the dockers' and carters' strike in Belfast in 1907 and Connolly had taken up residence in the city in 1911.⁴⁷ In the pamphlet published by the Belfast Branch of the National Graves Association, *1916 - 1966: Belfast and Nineteen Sixteen*, Connolly was the figure most discussed and the leader (along with Casement) to whom Belfast felt most connected.⁴⁸ Therefore, for some on the left, it was important to frame the Rising differently in terms of both periodisation and geography in order to resist the version of history which captured it for the southern state.

Connolly's wider popularity during the jubilee stemmed from the perception both of his personality and his politics. Desmond Ryan had written of him that 'Connolly within a few years [of his death] was buried in a shroud of words, both by his enemies and by his friends ...'⁴⁹ Out of this, however, he emerged as a figure who was seen as more human and much less remote than some of the other signatories of the Proclamation. Waverley Records released an album entitled *His Name was Connolly*, which contained a variety of songs telling tales of Connolly's life and death. One reviewer described them as being delivered in 'a Behanesque rollicking roar, the songs have considerable impact, some of them are touching'.⁵⁰ Connolly's life resonated with the politics of the 1960s. At the unveiling of a plaque to Connolly in Mallow by his daughter, the

⁴⁶ M. Daly, 'Less a commemoration of the actual achievements and more a commemoration of the hopes of the men of 1916' in Daly and Callaghan (eds.), *1916 in 1966*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Betty Sinclair, 'Connolly in Belfast', in Nolan, *Easter Week 1916-1966*, pp 16-17.

⁴⁸ National Graves Association, Belfast Branch, *1916-1966: Belfast and Nineteen Sixteen* (Belfast, n.d.).

⁴⁹ Desmond Ryan, 'James Connolly', in J.W. Boyle (ed.), *Leaders and Workers: The Thomas Davis Lectures* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1966). (Broadcast on Radio Éireann in 1961), p. 67.

⁵⁰ *United Irishman*, May 1966.

local TD, Patrick McAuliffe, noted that the freedom for which the rebel had died included the freedom to demand a just wage and the right of free men to strike in support of that demand.⁵¹

Connolly was the labour movement's link to the national movement and much of what was written in 1966 underlined the fact that Connolly's 'socialism, nationalism and trade union struggles were all complementary', as Deasy wrote, 'one being incomplete without the other and that all constituted not different worlds, but made up his one world'.⁵² Desmond Ryan asserted that 'Connolly was a man who belonged to, and worked in two worlds: the world of international socialism and the world of militant nationalism'.⁵³ And, for Desmond Greaves, Connolly had recognised that it was impossible to counterpose socialism and nationalism within Ireland: 'the two were very different aspects of one democratic movement'.⁵⁴ The labour movement, therefore, linked itself through Connolly to a long tradition of republicanism going back to the United Irishmen, who had initiated a rebellion with 'something approaching a rudimentary General Strike'.⁵⁵ The lineage of labour struggles could be further traced through Robert Emmet, John Mitchel and Fintan Lalor.⁵⁶ The aim of the left in 1966 was not to debunk the story of Irish nationalism prior to the Rising: it was to embrace it with a different emphasis. All groups wanted to say that the tradition that produced the Easter Rising was their tradition.

The golden jubilee of the Rising

The commemoration of the Easter Rising provided a way for Irish society to have important debates by proxy. Given the political context it is not surprising that economic arguments were prominent and formed a significant part of the dissent expressed by a vocal minority during the anniversary. Even the blowing up of Nelson's Pillar in Dublin in March 1966 was interpreted by

⁵¹ *Corkman*, 18 June 1966.

⁵² J. Deasy, *The Teachings of James Connolly (with a brief outline of his life)* (Dublin: New Books, 1966), p. 3.

⁵³ Ryan, 'James Connolly', p. 67.

⁵⁴ Greaves, 'Reflections', p. 112.

⁵⁵ Greaves, 'Reflections', p. 112.

⁵⁶ Greaves, 'Reflections', p. 112.

some as an indictment of the recent budget in the Republic and of ‘Jack [Lynch] and the moneygrabbers’.⁵⁷ It was generally anticipated that Republicans would use the anniversary to upstage the official commemoration, however, apart from the blowing up of the Pillar and some isolated incidents, the main opposition to the government’s programme came in the form of parades and debates around different interpretations of the revolutionary period. Republicans launched an alternative commemorative programme, organised by the 1916 Golden Jubilee Committee, included 10 o’clock mass on Easter Sunday in St John the Baptist Church, Blackrock, followed by a parade to the republican plot at Dean’s Grange cemetery. A second parade at 3pm in Dublin took place from the Custom House to the republican plot at Glasnevin cemetery. The committee chair Éamonn Mac Thomáis explained at the launch that the programme would be the same as in any other year, ‘with the exception that there would be more commemorative lectures’.⁵⁸ Traditional and Catholic rituals continued to frame Republican commemorations, however, within this there were those who kept economic arguments at the centre of the debate. After a wreath laying ceremony at the grave of the republican Patrick McGrath on Easter Sunday in Dublin, a public meeting was held outside the cemetery. Speakers, addressing the crowd from the back of a lorry, included Paul Donohoe who combined greetings from the Army Council with praise for the co-operative movement in the west of Ireland which would ‘eventually spell the end of the Irish neo-colonialist economy’. It was within this context that he issued the appeal to Irish youth ‘to join us in the ranks of the I.R.A. and help to hasten the day when foreign domination of our country will be ended’.⁵⁹

Marchers clashed with police along the route to Glasnevin cemetery as the gardaí had drawn their batons when they saw a colour party carrying a flag that they described as ‘an emblem’. The blue flag was that of the Dublin Battalion of the IRA. The result was a number of running scuffles during the afternoon parade and at a rally later in the evening, during which a number of marchers were badly beaten by the gardaí.⁶⁰ Nine people were admitted to hospital;

⁵⁷ *Northern Standard*, 18 March 1966.

⁵⁸ *Irish Times*, 9 February 1966.

⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 11 April 1966.

⁶⁰ Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, p. 55.

none had suffered serious injury.⁶¹ Seven people were arrested and six were charged with obstructing gardaí and were remanded in custody; the seventh was charged with assaulting a garda and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.⁶² Seán Ó Brádaigh issued a statement on behalf of Sinn Féin, accusing the police of brutality and comparing them with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in Belfast.⁶³ Members of the Irish Workers' Party (IWP) and of labour and trade union groups had participated in the event and the IWP also issued a statement saying that the actions of the gardaí were not only directed at the flag, which had been carried on public parades in the past, but that, 'These actions would appear to be a deliberate attempt at intimidation against all those who rightly consider that the ideals of Easter Week were betrayed by the recent signing of the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement, which will bind the country closer than ever to Britain economically and can lead to a form of political reunion.'⁶⁴

The final event of the National Committee programme was the unveiling of the National Graves Association plot in Glasnevin cemetery on 24 April 1966. Glasnevin had long operated as a commemorative site of opposition to state nationalism.⁶⁵ Seán Lemass's response to the plot is suggestive of his perception of where the more significant political threat lay in 1966. The Taoiseach corresponded with Jim Gibbons, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance, regarding what was perceived to be the 'unsuitable and unworthy' scheme for the plot but felt limited in how the government could respond. Lemass wrote to Gibbons, 'I agree that we should not be associated with the design which is likely to evoke adverse public comment, and particularly one which cannot be completed by next Easter.' However, he did believe it to be 'important that as much as possible should be done to improve the appearance of the Plot by Easter next, and I think it would be advisable to urge the Cemeteries Committee to do everything in their power to this end, offering them financial help if this is required'.⁶⁶ Lemass did not want

⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 25 April 1966.

⁶² *United Irishman*, May 1966.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 25 April 1966.

⁶⁴ *Irish Socialist*, June 1966.

⁶⁵ Nuala Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 153-61.

⁶⁶ NAI DT, 97/6/159, Seán Lemass to Jim Gibbons, 2 October 1965.

to be embarrassed by the NGA plot but nor was he overly troubled by it. Piaras Mac Lochlainn, the secretary of the official commemorative committee, had ‘a long and amicable discussion’ with Mac Thomáis and Jack Butler of the 1916 Golden Jubilee Committee to ensure that the official and unofficial parades on Easter Sunday would not clash.⁶⁷ Some accommodation could be found because the IRA was not seen to be the greatest threat to the stability of the government in the Republic in 1966. British records reveal that Lemass viewed reports on the IRA as tending towards exaggeration, ‘but this did not mean that he was taking them lightly’.⁶⁸ In 1966 Lemass was much more preoccupied with those who threatened his economic policies than he was with traditional republicans. He told those at a Fianna Fáil dinner that while it was important not to become too absorbed in the past, ‘or to start futile arguments over what might have been, or permit old dying controversies to be stirred up again’.⁶⁹ Lemass’s impulse was to discourage thinking about lost possibilities partly because he wanted to preempt economic divisions.

Conclusion

Commemorations are not simply ritualistic events or reenactments; they are a window into the power structures and preoccupations of a society. In Ireland the Easter Rising is seen as a historical moment of great possibility. Disillusionment with what came later has strengthened rather than diminished its significance and, as a result, it is an event through which many groups within Irish society seek to assert authority and integrity. This was true of the disparate activists, intellectuals and sympathizers on the left in 1966. However, their aim during the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising was not just a matter of staking a claim or marking bona fides by linking themselves to the life and legacy James Connolly. It was to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies in Irish society. They attempted to use the energising nature of commemoration to recommit to the ideals of Easter week as they understood them and to strengthen their arguments for economic and political change. The call in 1966 by those on the left was for a return to the

⁶⁷ NAI DT, 97/6/162, Piaras Mac Lochlainn to Department of the Taoiseach, 10 March 1966.

⁶⁸ See Tracey, ‘Rethinking the Republic’, p. 232.

⁶⁹ NAI GIS, 1/221, Speech by Seán Lemass at the annual dinner of West Galway Comhairle Dáil-Cheantair of Fianna Fáil, Salthill, 27 January 1966.

values of Connolly and a rebuilding of the labour movement in order to work towards a Social Republic rather than a Commercial Republic.⁷⁰ The modernisation of the economy in the south of Ireland had increased the proportion of industrial to agricultural workers and this had created, it was believed, an important opportunity to spread the consciousness of its own power throughout the working class.⁷¹ However, it is easier to agree a task than to execute it. The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising reminded some people of the importance of a radical alternative to the political and economic system but it also reassured others of the continuing achievements of the southern state. However, commemorations themselves do not initiate change; they are vivid moments rather than turning points. It was the context in which the fiftieth anniversary took place that determined how events would unfold in Ireland in the years that followed.

⁷⁰ Michael McInerney, 'Politics', in *1916-1966: What has Happened?* (Dublin: TCD Publishing Company, 1966), p. 18.

⁷¹ Greaves, 'Reflections', p.116.